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A REVIEW STUDY OF PHYTOCHEMICAL AND PHYTO-CONSTITUENTS OF NEEM

Mr.Mohd Danish Salahuddin[1], Mohammad Huzaifa Shaikh Raju [2], Shaikh Ehsan Gausmiya[3], Khan Adil Aurangzeb[4], Khopade Karan Krishna [5],

Assistant Professor[1], Students[2.3.4.5]

[1,2,3,4,5] Department of Pharmacology,

Ismail Mehta College of Pharmacy, Ambad, Jalna,

Maharashtra, India-431204

Abstract: Neem (Azadirachta indica A. Juss), an ancient and extraordinary medicinal tree belonging to the family Meliaceae, is justly celebrated across traditional medicine systems as a 'complete pharmacy in itself.' Indigenous to the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia, neem has been used medicinally for over four millennia in Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani systems. Its wide pharmacological repertoire has attracted global scientific attention, resulting in the characterisation of more than 300 distinct phytochemical compounds from its various parts including leaves, bark, seeds, flowers, fruits, roots, and gum exudate.

This review comprehensively consolidates the current knowledge on the phytochemical constituents of neem — encompassing limonoids, terpenoids, flavonoids, polyphenols, tannins, alkaloids, saponins, sterols, fatty acids, polysaccharides, and volatile compounds — and systematically relates them to documented pharmacological activities including antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, anticancer, antidiabetic, antifertility, antioxidant, immunomodulatory, insecticidal, and hepatoprotective actions. The review also discusses extraction methodologies, structure-activity relationships (SAR), toxicological considerations, and future research trajectories, providing a holistic reference for both traditional phytotherapy and modern drug discovery.

Keywords Azadirachta indica A. Juss, Meliaceae, 300 distinct phytochemical compounds, leaves, bark, seeds, flowers, fruits, roots, and gum, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, anticancer, antidiabetic, antifertility, antioxidant, immunomodulatory, insecticidal, and hepatoprotective actions.

1. Introduction

The genus Azadirachta, native to the Indian subcontinent, comprises only two species — Azadirachta indica (neem) and Azadirachta excelsa (sentang). Of these, Azadirachta indica is by far the more pharmacologically significant and commercially important species. Known by over 40 vernacular names — including Nimba (Sanskrit), Neem (Hindi/Urdu), Nim (Marathi/Gujarati), Vembu (Tamil), Bevu (Kannada), and Margosa or Indian Lilac (English) — the neem tree has an unparalleled cultural and medical heritage in the Indian subcontinent.

From a historical perspective, neem was described in Kautilya's Arthashastra (4th century BCE) as a component of agricultural preparations, and in the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita (Ayurvedic treatises, circa 1st–4th centuries CE) as a treatment for skin diseases, fever, parasitic infestations, dental disorders, and eye ailments. The Sanskrit name 'Nimba' literally derives from 'Nimbati syasthyamdadati' — meaning 'to give good health.' The Unani system of medicine termed it 'Shajar-e-mubarak' (the blessed tree).

Modern scientific inquiry into neem phytochemistry was catalysed by Siddiqui's isolation of nimbin and nimbinin from neem oil in 1942, followed by Butterworth and Morgan's landmark In contemporary molecular medicine, the research trajectory surrounding methylxanthines has expanded exponentially. No longer confined to the boundaries of lifestyle optimization or basic alertness, these compounds are at the forefront of neuroprotective therapeutic development. As global demographics shift toward an aging population, the incidence of debilitating neurodegenerative disorders—such as Alzheimer's disease (AD) and Parkinson's disease (PD)—has risen to critical, epidemic proportions. Current pharmaceutical regimens offer merely palliative relief, completely failing to halt or reverse the underlying progressive cascade of neuronal death. Methylxanthines present a highly compelling, multi-targeted therapeutic paradigm. Their ability to simultaneously suppress neuroinflammatory signaling, attenuate oxidative stress, preserve mitochondrial structural integrity, and optimize neurotransmitter homeostasis positions them as powerful candidates for disease-modifying interventions. isolation of azadirachtin from seeds in 1968. Since then, an exponential body of research — encompassing over 5,000 published scientific papers and several hundred identified compounds — has validated and extended many traditional therapeutic claims. The plant now occupies a unique position at the intersection of traditional wisdom and modern drug discovery.

The objective of this review is to provide a thorough, consolidated, and updated account of (a) the diverse phytochemical classes present in neem, (b) the specific compounds identified within each class, (c) their distribution across different plant parts, and (d) their established and emerging pharmacological significance. Where relevant, structural chemistry, extraction methods, and clinical or in vivo evidence are discussed to provide context.

2. Taxonomy, Botanical Description, and Distribution

2.1 Scientific Classification

Taxonomic Rank	Classification
Kingdom	Plantae
Sub-Kingdom	Tracheobionta (Vascular plants)
Super Division	Spermatophyta (Seed plants)
Division	Magnoliophyta (Flowering plants)
Class	Magnoliopsida (Dicotyledons)
Sub-Class	Rosidae
Order	Sapindales
Family	Meliaceae (Mahogany family)
Genus	Azadirachta
Species	indica
Authority	A. Juss (Adrien-Henri de Jussieu, 1830)

Taxonomic Rank	Classification
Binomial Name	Azadirachta indica A. Juss
Synonyms	Melia azadirachta L.; Melia indica (A. Juss) Brandis
Common Names	Neem, Nimba, Indian Lilac, Margosa Tree, Nimtree

Table 1: Taxonomic Classification of Azadirachta indica

2.2 Botanical Description

Neem is a fast-growing, semi-evergreen to evergreen tree that typically attains a height of 15–25 metres, with a relatively straight trunk 30–80 cm in diameter. The bark is greyish-brown, rough, and becomes deeply furrowed and scaly in older specimens. The crown is dense and rounded, providing extensive shade. Leaves are pinnately compound, 20–40 cm in length, with 8–19 leaflets that are lanceolate to elliptic-lanceolate, 3–8 cm long, sharply serrate, and dark glossy green.

Flowers are small (5–6 mm across), white to pale yellow, fragrant, and borne in axillary panicles of 10–30 cm length. The plant is primarily insect-pollinated. Fruits are smooth, olive-like drupes, 1.4–2.8 cm long and 1.0–1.5 cm in diameter. The green unripe fruit turns yellow-green to golden-yellow upon maturity. Each fruit contains a single elongated seed (kernel) enclosed within a hard inner shell (endocarp) — it is this seed kernel that constitutes the primary commercial and pharmacological source of neem limonoids.

The root system is deep and extensive, with a prominent tap root and laterals, enabling remarkable drought resistance. The tree can survive on as little as 400 mm annual rainfall and grows in well-drained, deep, sandy to clayey soils. It is remarkably drought-tolerant and xerophytic, which has facilitated its successful naturalization across arid and semi-arid zones worldwide.

2.3 Geographic Distribution

Neem is native to the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal) and mainland South-East Asia (Myanmar, Thailand). Due to deliberate cultivation for shade, agroforestry, timber, and medicinal purposes, it is now found across sub-Saharan Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, tropical Australia, Central America, the Caribbean, and parts of South America. The tree is particularly abundant in India, where it is found virtually everywhere below 700 m altitude. India has an estimated 18 million neem trees under cultivation and in natural settings.

3. Traditional Uses and Ethnobotanical Significance

Neem holds a uniquely comprehensive position in traditional medicine systems across multiple cultures. In Ayurveda, it is classified by the properties Tikta (bitter), Kashaya (astringent), Laghu (light), and Ruksha (dry), and by Shita (cold) potency. It is attributed to Katu Vipaka (pungent post-digestive effect) and is considered pacifying to Pitta (fire) and Kapha (earth-water) doshas. The Charaka Samhita lists neem as a chief remedy for kushtha (skin diseases), krimi (parasitic infections), jwara (fever), and vrana shodhana (wound purification).

In the Unani system, neem (Neem/Nim) is described as possessing antiseptic, antipyretic, tonic, and diuretic properties. West African traditional medicine employs neem bark and leaf decoctions for malaria, and the plant is called 'Yaro' in Hausa, reflecting its ubiquitous therapeutic role. In South-East Asia, neem leaves are placed in grain stores as a natural grain protectant, and leaf preparations are used for skin diseases and fever.

Part Used	Traditional Application	System of Medicine
Leaves	Wound healing, anthelmintic, malaria, skin ulcers, eye inflammation, dandruff, insect repellent, conjunctivitis	Ayurveda, Unani, African TM
Bark	Fever reduction, urinary disorders, wound antiseptic, gum disease, malaria, diarrhoea, skin diseases	Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha
Seed/Oil	Contraceptive, scabies, ringworm, leprosy, antifungal, insecticide, hair treatment, rheumatism	Ayurveda, African TM, Folk
Flowers	Bile disorders, intestinal worms, phlegm reduction, anorexia, skin eruptions	Ayurveda, Siddha
Fruits	Piles, urinary diseases, diabetes, eye disorders, wounds, worms	Ayurveda, Unani
Roots	Tonic, asthma, anthelmintic, fever, urinary complaints, skin diseases	Ayurveda, Folk
Gum	Wounds, skin diseases, scabies, ringworm, sores	Ayurveda, Folk
Twigs	Dental hygiene (chewing stick), toothache, gum disease, plaque prevention	Ayurveda, African TM, Islamic

Table 2: Traditional uses of Azadirachta indica by plant part and system of medicine

4. Overview of Phytochemical Classes

The phytochemical richness of Azadirachta indica is unparalleled among medicinal plants. More than 300 compounds spanning over 10 chemical classes have been isolated and characterised from various parts of the tree. The primary classes include: (1) Limonoids (tetranortriterpenoids), (2) other terpenoids and sterols, (3) flavonoids, (4) tannins and polyphenols, (5) alkaloids, (6) saponins, (7) fatty acids and fixed oils, (8) polysaccharides, (9) sulfurous compounds, and (10) volatile/essential oil constituents. A qualitative overview by plant part is presented below.

Phytochemical Class	Leaves	Bark	Seeds/Oil	Flowers	Fruits	Roots
Limonoids (tetranortriterpenoids)	++++	+++	++++	+++	++	++
Flavonoids	++++	++	+	++++	++	+
Tannins / Polyphenols	+++	++++	+	++	++	++
Alkaloids	++	++	+	+	+	+
Saponins	++	+++	+	+	+	++
Sterols / Terpenoids	+++	+++	+++	++	++	++
Fatty Acids / Fixed Oils	+	+	++++	+	++	+
Polysaccharides	++	+++	+	+	++	+
Sulfurous Compounds	+	+	+++	+	+	+
Volatile / Essential Oil Cpds	+++	+	++	+++	+	+

Table 3: Qualitative distribution of phytochemical classes across neem plant parts (++++ = very abundant, + = trace)

5. Limonoids — The Hallmark Phytoconstituents

Limonoids (tetranortriterpenoids) are the most pharmacologically significant and chemically distinctive class of compounds in neem. They are characterised by a highly modified triterpenoid skeleton — specifically, the euphane/tirucallane-type tetranortriterpenoid backbone — from which four carbon atoms have been lost from the side chain. The family Meliaceae is the richest known source of limonoids; among Meliaceae species, Azadirachta indica is the single richest repository, with over 150 limonoids identified. Their complexity, with multiple stereocentres and oxygenated functionalities, makes them among the most structurally intricate natural products known.

5.1 Azadirachtin — The Flagship Compound

Azadirachtin ($C_{35}H_{44}O_{16}$, MW = 720.72 g/mol) is the most studied and commercially significant compound in neem. Isolated by Butterworth and Morgan in 1968, its complete relative and absolute configuration was established by Ley et al. in 1985 after nearly two decades of intensive spectroscopic work — a milestone in natural product chemistry owing to the compound's extraordinary structural complexity (16 stereocentres, four tetrahydrofuran rings, a vinyl epoxide, and multiple ester linkages).

Azadirachtin acts primarily as an insect growth regulator (IGR) and antifeedant. Its biological mechanism is multifaceted: (a) it inhibits the biosynthesis and release of ecdysone (the insect moulting hormone) from prothoracic glands, disrupting the insect moult cycle at concentrations as low as 0.001 ppm; (b) it interferes with juvenile hormone titre, disrupting metamorphosis; (c) it deters feeding behaviour through bitter taste receptors; and (d) it impairs reproduction by reducing fecundity and egg viability. It is commercially extracted from neem seed kernels and constitutes the active principle in numerous registered biopesticide formulations worldwide.

The seed kernel contains 0.20–0.90% azadirachtin (dry weight basis), with content varying by geographic origin, season, extraction method, and post-harvest storage. Degradation is rapid under UV light and alkaline conditions, making formulation stability a critical manufacturing challenge.

5.2 Nimbin, Nimbinin, and Nimbidic Acid

Nimbin ($C_{30}H_{36}O_9$, MW = 540.60 g/mol) was the first neem compound to be isolated in pure form, by Siddiqui in 1942, from the crude neem oil obtained by cold-pressing seed kernels. It is a triterpenoid limonoid with a characteristic butenolide (gamma-lactone) ring. Nimbin exhibits anti-inflammatory activity through inhibition of prostaglandin synthetase, antipyretic activity comparable to acetylsalicylic acid in animal models, and notable antifungal activity against Candida albicans and dermatophytes.

Nimbinin is a structural isomer of nimbin co-isolated from neem oil, with similar but distinct spectroscopic properties. Nimbidic acid, a de-esterified derivative, is found in neem leaf and demonstrates significant anti-inflammatory properties. Deacetylnimbin and deacetylnimbinene are related compounds isolated from seed kernels with demonstrated antiviral activity.

5.3 Nimbidin

Nimbidin is one of the primary bitter principles of neem seed oil. It was originally characterised as a complex mixture but has been progressively resolved into structurally defined components. Nimbidin demonstrates one of the broadest biological activity profiles of any neem compound: anti-inflammatory effects (comparable to phenylbutazone in carrageenan-induced rat paw oedema assay), anti-ulcer activity (inhibiting Helicobacter pylori and reducing gastric acid secretion), spermicidal activity (providing the biochemical basis for neem's traditional use as a male contraceptive), and notable antibacterial and antifungal activities.

5.4 Gedunin

Gedunin ($C_{28}H_{34}O_7$, MW = 482.56 g/mol) is a tetranortriterpenoid found in neem seed kernels, bark, and leaves. It is named after the Nigerian tree Entandrophragma angolense (gedu nohor), from which it was first isolated, but is present in notably higher concentrations in neem. Gedunin is a potent antimalarial compound with in vitro activity against Plasmodium falciparum (IC_{50} = 0.6–1.2 micrograms/mL), comparable to standard antimalarials. More recently, gedunin has attracted major interest as a Hsp90 (heat shock protein 90) inhibitor — Hsp90 being a critical molecular chaperone for numerous oncoproteins. Gedunin destabilises Hsp90 client proteins including Her-2, Cdk4, and Akt, leading to apoptosis in breast, prostate, lung, and colorectal cancer cell lines.

5.5 Salannin and Salannol

Salannin ($C_{34}H_{44}O_9$) is a tetranortriterpenoid found predominantly in neem seeds and leaves. It is a potent insect antifeedant, working synergistically with azadirachtin. Unlike azadirachtin, salannin's mechanism is predominantly peripheral — it deters feeding behaviour by acting on gustatory sensilla of phytophagous insects without significantly affecting the hormonal moult cycle. Salannol is its hydroxylated metabolite, also found in seed preparations, with comparable antifeedant activity but greater polarity.

5.6 Nimbolide

Nimbolide ($C_{27}H_{30}O_7$, MW = 466.53 g/mol) is a protolimonoid found predominantly in neem leaves and flowers. It has attracted enormous attention in oncology research in the past two decades. Nimbolide suppresses tumour growth in multiple cancer models via diverse mechanisms: (a) induction of intrinsic (mitochondrial) and extrinsic apoptosis through caspase-3/7/9 activation; (b) downregulation of Akt, mTOR, and NF-kappaB signalling; (c) generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and oxidative stress; (d) inhibition of tumour angiogenesis by reducing VEGF expression; (e) anti-invasive and anti-metastatic effects through MMP inhibition. Effective in vivo concentrations are in the range of 5–20 mg/kg body weight in murine cancer models.

5.7 Other Significant Limonoids

Compound	Molecular Formula	Plant Part	Key Activity
Azadirone	$C_{28}H_{34}O_4$	Seeds, bark	Antifungal, anti-tumour, insecticidal
Nimbandiol	$C_{28}H_{36}O_5$	Bark	Antibacterial, antifungal
Ichangin	$C_{26}H_{30}O_7$	Bark	Antimalarial
Mahmoodin	$C_{28}H_{36}O_8$	Bark	Antibacterial (Gram +/-)
Margolone	$C_{30}H_{36}O_5$	Bark	Antifungal, antibacterial
Vepinin	$C_{30}H_{38}O_8$	Seeds	Insecticidal, antifeedant
Fraxinellone	$C_{14}H_{16}O_3$	Bark, seeds	Insecticidal, antifungal
3-Deacetylsalannin	$C_{32}H_{42}O_8$	Seeds	Insect antifeedant
Deacetylnimbin	$C_{28}H_{34}O_8$	Seeds	Antiviral, anti-inflammatory
Nimocin	$C_{28}H_{34}O_8$	Bark	Antifungal, antibacterial
Nimbinene	$C_{30}H_{36}O_8$	Leaves	Antifeedant, anti-inflammatory

Compound	Molecular Formula	Plant Part	Key Activity
Prieurianin	$C_{28}H_{36}O_9$	Bark	Cytotoxic, antimicrobial
Rohitukin	$C_{30}H_{38}O_9$	Bark	Anti-inflammatory
Meliacinolin	$C_{32}H_{42}O_{10}$	Seeds	Insecticidal

Table 4: Selected additional limonoid compounds from Azadirachta indica

6. Other Terpenoids and Phytosterols

6.1 Pentacyclic Triterpenoids

Several pentacyclic triterpenoids of the ursane and oleanane types have been identified in neem bark and leaves. Ursolic acid ($C_{30}H_{48}O_3$, MW = 456.70 g/mol) is present in significant quantities in neem leaf and bark extracts. It exhibits potent anti-inflammatory activity (comparable to indomethacin), anti-hepatotoxic properties (reducing CCl_4-induced liver damage in animal models), anti-tumour effects (inhibiting proliferation of multiple cancer cell lines at IC_{50} of 2–10 micrograms/mL), and anti-retroviral activity against HIV-1. Oleanolic acid ($C_{30}H_{48}O_3$, MW = 456.70 g/mol) — a structural isomer of ursolic acid — is co-present in bark extracts with hepatoprotective, anti-inflammatory, and antimicrobial properties. Betulinic acid has also been tentatively identified in neem bark.

6.2 Phytosterols

Beta-sitosterol ($C_{29}H_{50}O$, MW = 414.71 g/mol) is one of the most abundant sterols in neem leaves, bark, and seeds. It is a plant analogue of cholesterol that inhibits intestinal cholesterol absorption, reduces serum LDL, and exhibits anti-inflammatory activity through modulation of arachidonic acid metabolism and cytokine production. It also demonstrates significant anti-tumour effects and is widely used in nutraceuticals for benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH). Stigmasterol and campesterol are co-present phytosterols with anti-osteoarthritic and anti-proliferative activities. Cycloeucalenol, an uncommon 9,19-cyclopropane sterol, has been reported from neem bark.

6.3 Diterpenes

Neem bark yields several diterpenic compounds. Margolone, margolonone, isomargolonone, and cyclomargolone are a unique series of 8-oxo-steroids (keto-steroids) isolated from neem root bark — a structural class not commonly encountered in higher plants, and unique to neem root within the genus. These compounds display significant antifungal activity against Candida and Aspergillus species.

7. Flavonoids and Polyphenols

Flavonoids constitute one of the most abundant and pharmacologically diverse classes of phytoconstituents in neem, particularly in leaves and flowers. They are C6-C3-C6 polyphenolic compounds classified into flavonols, flavones, flavanones, flavan-3-ols, isoflavones, and anthocyanidins. Neem is particularly rich in flavonols (quercetin, kaempferol, rutin, myricetin) and flavan-3-ols (catechin, epicatechin). Total flavonoid content of neem leaf extracts ranges from 15–80 mg quercetin equivalents per gram dry weight, depending on extraction solvent and method.

Flavonoid Compound	Chemical Type	Location in Plant	Primary Biological Activity
Quercetin	Flavonol	Leaves, flowers, bark	Antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, anticancer, antiviral, COX-2 inhibitor
Kaempferol	Flavonol	Leaves, flowers	Antioxidant, anticancer, anti-inflammatory, antifungal
Rutin	Flavonol glycoside	Leaves, bark	Antioxidant, antihypertensive, anti-inflammatory, vascular protection
Myricetin	Flavonol	Leaves	Antioxidant, antiviral, anti-tumour, anti-diabetic
Isorhamnetin	Flavonol	Leaves, flowers	Anti-inflammatory, antifungal, cardioprotective
Catechin	Flavan-3-ol	Bark, leaves	Antioxidant, antiviral, antimicrobial, anti-tumour
Epicatechin	Flavan-3-ol	Bark, leaves	Antioxidant, cardioprotective, anti-platelet
Nimbaflavone	Biflavonoid	Leaves	Antifungal, insecticidal
Quercetin-3-O-glucoside	Flavonol glycoside	Leaves	Antioxidant, anti-inflammatory
Apigenin	Flavone	Flowers	Anti-inflammatory, anxiolytic, anticancer
Luteolin	Flavone	Flowers, leaves	Anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, anticancer

Table 5: Flavonoid compounds identified in Azadirachta indica

Non-flavonoid polyphenols are also well-represented in neem. Caffeic acid, chlorogenic acid, ferulic acid, p-coumaric acid, gallic acid, and ellagic acid have been quantified in neem leaf and bark extracts by HPLC. These hydroxycinnamic and hydroxybenzoic acid derivatives contribute significantly to the total antioxidant capacity and also demonstrate antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, and anti-mutagenic activities.

8. Tannins

Neem bark is one of the richest botanical sources of tannins, with total tannin content reported as high as 12–15% (dry weight) in bark powder. Both hydrolysable tannins (gallotannins and ellagitannins) and condensed tannins (proanthocyanidins) have been identified. Gallic acid, ellagic acid, and their derivatives (methyl gallate, galloyl glucoses) are major hydrolysable tannin constituents. Punicalin and punicalagin-type ellagitannins from neem bark have demonstrated potent antiviral activity against herpes simplex virus-1 (HSV-1) and HSV-2, with IC50 values of 1.5–3.0 micrograms/mL.

The pharmacological basis of tannins' broad antimicrobial activity lies in their protein-precipitating capacity — they bind to bacterial cell surface proteins and adhesins, disrupting colonisation and membrane permeability. Their astringent character also explains neem bark's efficacy in wound management: tannins stimulate vasoconstriction, reduce exudate formation, and create a protective proteinaceous layer over wound surfaces that resists microbial invasion.

Condensed tannins (proanthocyanidins B-type) from neem leaves and bark exhibit potent antioxidant activity (DPPH free radical scavenging IC50 = 12–25 micrograms/mL) and also demonstrate anti-inflammatory activity through LOX (lipoxygenase) and COX pathway inhibition.

9. Alkaloids

While neem is not typically classified as an alkaloid-producing plant in the classical sense, several nitrogen-containing bioactive compounds with alkaloid-like properties have been isolated, particularly from bark and leaves. These include:

- Nimbirine — An indole-based alkaloid from neem bark with anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties. It inhibits prostaglandin formation in a mechanism complementary to nimbin.
- Mahmoodin — An alkaloidal compound from bark, distinct from the limonoid mahmoodin described earlier, with antibacterial activity against Staphylococcus aureus and Pseudomonas aeruginosa.
- Margosine — A minor alkaloid from neem bark with demonstrated antibacterial activity.
- Cyclic trisulphide and tetrasulphide — Sulfurous pseudo-alkaloids from neem oil; these are technically not alkaloids but contribute nitrogen-like polarity to crude alkaloid fractions during extraction. They exhibit marked antifungal and antibacterial activity.
- Nimbosterin — A steroidal alkaloid from neem with antibacterial properties targeting Gram-positive organisms.

The alkaloid content of neem is generally low (<0.5% in most extracts), but their synergistic contribution to the total antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory activity of crude extracts is considered significant.

10. Saponins

Saponins are amphiphilic glycosides characterised by a steroid or triterpenoid aglycone (sapogenin) attached to one or more sugar chains. In neem, saponins are found primarily in leaves and bark, with traces in seeds. Both steroidal (furostanol-type) and triterpenoid (oleanolic acid-based) saponins have been identified. Neem saponins exhibit significant antifungal activity — they intercalate into ergosterol-containing fungal cell membranes, increasing membrane permeability and causing cell lysis at minimum inhibitory concentrations of 0.25–1.0 mg/mL against Candida and Aspergillus species.

Neem bark saponins also show potent anthelmintic activity against intestinal nematodes (Ascaris lumbricoides, Strongyloides species), with efficacy comparable to albendazole in some in vitro assays. This mechanistically supports the widespread traditional use of neem bark decoctions as vermifuges. Additionally, neem saponin fractions stimulate macrophage phagocytosis and enhance the production of nitric oxide and reactive oxygen species by activated macrophages — effects consistent with immunostimulant activity.

11. Detailed Phytochemical Profile by Plant Part

11.1 Leaves

Neem leaves are the most readily available and widely studied plant material. Their total polyphenol content ranges from 80–150 mg gallic acid equivalents per gram dry weight, and total flavonoid content from 20–80 mg quercetin equivalents per gram. Key compounds identified include nimbolide, mahmoodin, nimbinene, quercetin, rutin, kaempferol, beta-sitosterol, ursolic acid, chlorogenic acid, caffeic acid, beta-carotene, lutein, zeaxanthin, and multiple carotenoids. The aqueous extract is particularly rich in polysaccharides, tannins, and flavonoid glycosides; the ethanolic extract captures the full polyphenolic profile; hexane fractions yield beta-sitosterol, stigmasterol, and terpenoids.

11.2 Bark

Neem bark (stem bark and root bark) is the primary commercial source of nimbidin, nimbin, and nimbinin. Its very high tannin content (10–15% dry weight) is responsible for the strongly astringent character of bark decoctions. Polysaccharides from bark have the most documented immunomodulatory activity. The bark also yields unique keto-steroids (margolone series) found only in root bark, not present in leaves or seeds. Beta-sitosterol, campesterol, stigmasterol, ursolic acid, and oleanolic acid are found in bark throughout the plant's height.

11.3 Seeds and Seed Oil

Seeds represent the richest single source of neem limonoids. The kernel contains 35–50% fixed oil (neem oil), 15–20% protein, and 0.20–0.90% azadirachtin. Beyond azadirachtin, the seed yields salannin, salannol, nimbin, nimbidin, gedunin, nimbinin, azadirone, vepinin, meliacinolin, and a suite of over 20 minor limonoids. The seed oil also contains cyclic trisulphide and tetrasulphide responsible for the characteristic pungent odour.

11.4 Flowers

Neem flowers are particularly rich in nimbolide and protolimonoids, and in flavonoids (quercetin, isorhamnetin, apigenin, luteolin). Nimbosterol, a steroidal compound, is a notable flower constituent. Ethanolic flower extracts have demonstrated significant antioxidant activity (DPPH IC50 = 18–35 micrograms/mL) and hepatoprotective effects in CCl_4-induced liver injury models. The flower essential oil is rich in linalool, geraniol, and alpha-farnesene.

11.5 Fruits and Pulp

The outer fruit pulp contains sugars (glucose, fructose, sucrose), polyphenols, organic acids (citric acid, malic acid), and lower concentrations of limonoids than the seed kernel. The fruit pulp has been reported to contain compounds with activity against enteric pathogens and mild laxative properties, supporting traditional use for digestive complaints and piles. The fruit kernel (endocarp) is hard and fibrous, with minimal phytochemical significance.

11.6 Roots

Neem root bark is the unique source of the margolone-series 8-keto-steroids not found elsewhere in the plant. It also contains pentanortriterpenoids of the quassinoid type, several limonoids (fraxinellone, prieurianin), and standard triterpenoids (ursolic acid, oleanolic acid). Root extracts show potent antifungal activity attributed primarily to the margolone-series compounds and are used in Ayurveda for skin disorders and urinary tract infections.

12. Toxicological Profile and Safety Considerations

12.1 General Safety

Neem leaf and bark extracts at conventional therapeutic doses are generally regarded as safe for adult humans, consistent with their millennia of use. The oral LD50 of neem leaf aqueous extract in mice is reported as >5000 mg/kg body weight, placing it in the WHO Toxicity Class 5 (practically non-toxic) category. Sub-chronic toxicity studies at doses of 200–1000 mg/kg in rats for 90 days show no significant hepatic or renal toxicity.

12.2 Acute Toxicity of Neem Oil

Neem oil presents a different safety profile. Ingestion of neem oil — particularly in infants and young children — has been associated with toxic encephalopathy, severe metabolic acidosis, vomiting, seizures, and in rare cases death. Cases of neem oil poisoning have been documented in India and Bangladesh. The LD50 of neem oil in rats is approximately 14 mL/kg (oral), categorising it as moderately toxic. Responsible compounds are believed to include concentrated limonoids and sulfurous compounds that are poorly tolerated by the immature neonatal blood-brain barrier.

12.3 Antifertility and Reproductive Toxicity

Neem seed oil and nimbidin-containing extracts have documented antifertility effects: inhibition of implantation in female rats (post-coital), reversible azoospermia-like effects on male sperm motility and viability at high doses, and anti-spermatogenic effects with prolonged use. While this is of interest for contraceptive applications (Phase I clinical studies have been conducted in India), it mandates avoiding neem seed oil preparations during attempts to conceive and avoidance in pregnancy.

12.4 Drug Interactions

Neem's immunostimulant polysaccharides may theoretically interfere with immunosuppressive therapy (cyclosporin, tacrolimus) in transplant patients. Neem's hypoglycaemic effects, mediated by quercetin and other flavonoids, may potentiate oral hypoglycaemic drugs, necessitating blood glucose monitoring. Anticoagulant interactions are theoretically possible due to quercetin's anti-platelet aggregation effect. No serious herb-drug interaction cases have been formally documented to date.

13. Future Research Directions

Despite extensive investigation over seven decades, the phytochemistry and pharmacology of neem continue to offer rich opportunities for discovery and translation:

1. Nanoformulation for bioavailability enhancement: Major bioactive limonoids (azadirachtin, nimbolide, gedunin) suffer from poor aqueous solubility and rapid in vivo metabolism. Encapsulation in PLGA nanoparticles, chitosan nanoparticles, nanosuspensions, and liposomal systems has shown 3–8 fold improvements in bioavailability in animal studies. Translation of these systems to clinical-grade formulations is an active research priority.
2. Clinical translation: The vast majority of pharmacological evidence for neem compounds is from in vitro cell studies and animal models. Rigorous Phase I/II clinical trials for specific high-priority indications — particularly antimalarial activity of gedunin, anticancer activity of nimbolide, and antidiabetic effects of neem leaf extracts — are critically needed.
3. Metabolomics and untargeted profiling: Application of high-resolution mass spectrometry-based metabolomics (LC-HRMS) and NMR metabolomics will enable comprehensive mapping of the neem metabolome across different geographic varieties, seasons, and plant parts — potentially revealing novel bioactive entities not yet characterised.

4. Synthetic biology: Elucidation of the biosynthetic gene cluster(s) responsible for limonoid assembly in neem could enable heterologous production of high-value compounds (azadirachtin, nimbolide) in engineered microbial hosts, ensuring supply stability independent of agricultural production.
5. Standardisation and quality control: Development of validated HPLC and LC-MS fingerprint methods for authentication and quality assurance of commercial neem preparations is critical for regulatory acceptance in global markets.
6. Network pharmacology and multi-target drug design: Systems biology approaches can model the multi-target interactions of neem's complex phytochemical mixtures, providing a scientific basis for the synergistic broad-spectrum efficacy observed empirically, and guiding rational design of neem-based combination therapies.

14. Conclusion

This review has provided a comprehensive and systematic account of the phytochemical and phyto-constituent profile of Azadirachta indica (neem). The plant stands alone in the plant kingdom by virtue of the sheer breadth, structural complexity, and pharmacological significance of its secondary metabolite repertoire. From the landmark insect growth regulator azadirachtin to the emerging anticancer compound nimbolide; from the broad-spectrum antimicrobial tannins and saponins of its bark to the hepatoprotective flavonoids of its leaves; from the antifungal phytosterols to the immunostimulant polysaccharides — neem is a plant that continues to surprise and reward scientific investigation.

The convergence of four millennia of Ayurvedic clinical wisdom with the rigour of modern analytical chemistry, pharmacology, and molecular biology has established neem as one of the most comprehensively validated medicinal plants in the world. Its applications span conventional pharmaceutical development, biopesticide production, dental hygiene, cosmecology, and nutritional supplementation — testament to the universality of its bioactive chemical toolkit.

Future progress will depend on bridging the gap between laboratory promise and clinical reality, on deploying advanced formulation science to overcome bioavailability barriers, and on applying the power of modern systems biology to understand the synergistic interactions among neem's 300+ identified compounds. The neem tree, already over a billion years of evolutionary investment in phytochemical innovation, remains one of nature's most compelling gifts to medicine.

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